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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 DUBAI 001859

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SUBJECT: DRL DAS BARKS-RUGGLES' IRAN MEETINGS IN DUBAI

REF: A. DUBAI 1728, B. DUBAI 1319

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jason L Davis, Consul General, Dubai, UAE.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(C) Summary: During DRL DAS Erica Barks-Ruggles' March 16-19 trip to UAE, she met with a diverse strata of the Iranian population here, including students, teachers, professionals, and Baha'is. She also discussed Iran issues with two local think tanks. Common themes included a concern that the USG's publicized efforts to help political activists in Iran will put them in jeopardy, both in Iran -- where the government will use this as an excuse to clamp down -- and in the UAE, where the UAE government will feel pressure to clamp down on open political activity by Iranians. She also heard praise for many U.S. goals regarding Iran, mixed with criticism of the tone of some U.S. commentary. Iranians made various suggestions for VOA programming and people-to-people projects. Many pressed for more student visas, scholarships and exchange opportunities as the single most beneficial thing the U.S. could do to positively influence Iran. A Baha'i couple talked about repression at the hands of the Iranian government. End summary

UAE Realities

2.(C) The majority of interlocutors with whom DRL DAS Barks-Ruggles discussed Iran issues in the UAE March 16-19 indicated that the UAE would not welcome open political activism by Iranians here, and that Iranians here are vulnerable to pressure from both the GOI and the UAEG. (DAS Barks-Ruggles' conversation on Iran with a UAE official is reported septel.) Iranians in UAE have greater relative freedom than people living in Iran, but there are limits to that freedom -- placed in part by the UAE government, in part by the Iranian government, and in part by their own society. Iranians choose to live in the UAE for various reasons, including better economic opportunities and social freedoms. Many young people come here to go to university due to the scarcity of seats available in Iran. Several young men indicated that they would stay after their studies to avoid military service. Because of their desire to remain in UAE, Iranians are vulnerable to pressure from the UAE authorities not to rock the boat with political activism while they are here. Iranian university students said they had to sign a commitment not to conduct political activities before being allowed to open a Persian club at their university. Riad Kahwaji, CEO of the Dubai-based think tank Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis (INEGMA) (who is not Iranian) also stressed that the UAE does not want to anger Iran by allowing political activities here. He also noted that to date, there has been very little interaction between UAE and Iranian academics, such as conferences in Dubai.

3.(C) Iran itself also has the motivation and the means to discourage political activism in the Iranian diaspora in the UAE, either indirectly by pressuring UAE or directly, via the strong intelligence presence that is suspected here. One of the university students with whom Barks-Ruggles met said that in many ways he feels like Dubai is just an extension of Iran. (Note: The Iranian government promotes this sense by providing for Iranians' needs here, including Farsi-language, Iran-accredited schools; a hospital; a social club; and a newspaper.) A significant reason why that student wanted to live in Dubai was continued contact with Iran. However, Iranians fear repercussions for political activity when they travel back to Iran, as most of them do regularly. Dr. Mustafa Alani (who is not Iranian) at the Gulf Research Center cautioned that Iranian intelligence in the UAE is more pervasive than one might assume. He was pessimistic that many people would risk participating in USG projects here, since their families or businesses retain links in one form or another to Iran and/or the Iranian government. In light of this, he was a proponent of greater use of more indirect means, like television as a communication medium, (though he was very critical of al-Hurra). Kahwaji said he had noted fewer Iranians at a recent Track 2 event he attended in Greece, adding that he believes the Iranian government is clamping down on participation in such activities.

4.(C) Finally, the university students also indicated that in general - whether in Dubai or Iran - their parents discourage them from becoming politically active (since, like most parents, they do not want to see harm come to their children). The students said there had been a generational change since their parents' era, when people were more politically active. Students listed their primary concerns as 1) finding employment, 2) finding a partner, and 3) being well paid enough to live the lifestyle they want -- preferably one that allowed them to shift in and out of Iran. Reza Samadipour, from the Iranian Business Council, cautioned that Iran and the UAE both have a vested interest in continued business relations, and that the U.S.

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would likely get pushback from the local Iranian community -- and possibly the UAEG -- if a perception were to develop that it was our policy to interrupt this.

People-to-People Exchanges

5.(C) Despite these reservations, the Iranian university students strongly supported the concept of rebuilding bridges between the Iranian and the American peoples. They suggested that perhaps someone could establish an Iranian-American Friendship Society. They liked the idea of conferences or speakers at their university in Dubai, but favored multiple international sponsors, to minimize the footprint of the U.S. In light of the statement they had been compelled to sign (that their university Persian club would not get involved in political activities), they suggested a greater focus on business topics and cultural exchanges. Kahwaji echoed recent comments (reftel A) that there was more space for university-to-university exchanges, where the USG seemed less visible.

6.(C) The students also advocated approving direct flights from Iran to the U.S. as a message of solidarity with the Iranian people. In addition they asked for greater and easier access to more visas for students. They claimed it cost more to go to university in the UAE than in the U.S., while the quality of education was lower. In addition, they advocated for student exchanges and access to increased skills training through American schools and universities. They also thought it could be useful, either via Internet or on TV, to provide English language teaching material for classrooms in Iran.

Media Habits

7.(C) The Iranian university students discussed their media consumption habits and recommendations for programming into Iran. One student said the three sites he finds credible for news on Iran are: Baztab.com (founded by former presidential candidate Mohsen Rezai), VOA's website, and London-based oppositionist Ali Reza Nourizadeh's website, nourizadeh.com. He said he checks them daily and does not consume any press from inside Iran. Others noted that VOA's Farsi website is very credible, but that it is blocked inside of Iran. Most of our Iranian interlocutors, especially the students, agreed they did not like the private Farsi-language broadcasting out of "L.A." as the stations had lost credibility by exaggerating events and constantly predicting the downfall of the Iranian government.

8.(C) The Iranian students said they believe the Iranian government's claims to read messages sent by SMS. They thought the government monitored SMS even more than phone calls and emails. They said few Iranians in Iran have i-Pods and that most people in rural areas have limited access to the Internet - except through work (which is monitored) or Internet cafes.

USG Sponsored Media

9.(C) In the view of the university students, television programming is more effective than radio, in part because it is harder to jam satellite TV than short-wave radio. They recommended more debates on VOA-TV on issues, including between various external political factions. They liked the al-Jazeera show formatted on "Point-Counterpoint" as it is a lively debate of issues that are often taboo. They suggested including more content from political activists who have left Iran recently. They disagreed amongst themselves over how much access the poorer strata of society had to satellite television, with one student one saying "a lot," and the other saying "not much," -- while adding that passing around videotapes in Iran helped amplify the impact of programming. Both said Radio Farda's signal and website are effectively blocked in many places in Iran and asked why the U.S. did not set up FM transmitters along the border in Iraq and Afghanistan to combat jamming.

10.(C) Another contact, Reza Samadipour with the Iranian Business Council said he considers USG broadcasting a credible news source and uses its information as a reality check against other news about Iran. He recommended that broadcast management take a much more pedagogical approach towards its programming, formulating long-term "lesson plans." For instance, instead of random public opinion polls on Radio Farda on news of the day, a series of questions over several weeks could be posed to explore in depth and shape public attitudes to a specific subject, such as human rights. He also recommended that VOA develop children's television programming -- perhaps incorporating civic education into English language learning programs.

11.(C) Dr. Alani suggested that given the limits that the

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Iranian government will try to put on USG outreach to the Iranian people, the U.S. should focus primarily on UAE-based Iranians, with the expectation that they will operate as a bridge to Iranians back in Iran. He also suggested distributing in Dubai a free Farsi-language newspaper -- with some news, some advertising and a columnist or two -- which he said could reach both a resident population as well as Iranians traveling back and forth.

U.S. Rhetoric and Policies

12.(C) Even those who seem generally supportive of shared goals with the U.S. (i.e. for greater freedom in Iran) were at times critical of certain aspects of U.S. policy and rhetoric. One particularly eloquent and westernized Iranian university student said that he had been initially opposed to President Ahmadinejad but now he supports him out of nationalistic pride over the nuclear issue. He said Iranians get angry when they hear the

U.S. say Iran does not "need" nuclear energy because of its oil and gas reserves because 1) it is not the business of another country to make these decisions; and 2) it sounds hypocritical in light of the fact that the U.S. helped start those programs in the 1970s. He said he supports Iran's right to nuclear technology, despite the fact that he knows perfectly well that the regime wants a bomb and he himself is against Iran building a bomb.

13.(C) The university students also said that another perceived contradiction in U.S. policy was that we say we stand with the Iranian people, but at the same time we make the Iranian people fly in unsafe planes. Barks-Ruggles explained that we had offered to consider licensing the sale of planes by the EU in support of the EU-3 negotiation effort with Iran, but the GOI's rejection of the EU-3's efforts had led to a dead end. She also noted that we have, on occasion, licensed export of spare parts for safety reasons. However, the students indicated that in the view of the Iranian population, the U.S. does not care about their personal safety.

14.(C) Riad Kahwaji cautioned the U.S. not to make empty threats, and said that the drawn-out conflict in Iraq had reduced Iran's fear of the U.S. He stressed that Iran's weak point was its inability to deliver economically. He echoed a view held by many that the vote for Ahmadinejad was not so much for Ahmadinejad but against the corruption that Rafsanjani represented. The U.S. should exploit this weak point by focusing more on internal corruption issues in its rhetoric.

A Bleak Future for Iranian Youth

16.(C) DRL DAS Barks-Ruggles met a group of Iranian students March 18 who are studying in a Dubai TOEFL program. Out of the roughly 15 students present, only one had been accepted into an Iranian university and planned to return to Iran. The rest indicated they planned to study in the UAE or elsewhere. They said the vast majority of students who take the university entrance exam fail to secure a place. However, they disagreed amongst themselves how many times a student was allowed to take the test (some saying three, others saying it was unlimited). Most indicated they would likely try to stay in the UAE to work because there simply was not much opportunity in Iran. Almost all wanted to study hard sciences -- medicine, engineering, and architecture -- while only one person mentioned business and another psychology. A number of the students -- all males but one -- made it clear they were also outside the country in order to avoid military service. They said Iranian males who worked for two years after university outside of Iran were allowed to buy out their military service, which would allow them to travel back and forth. All the students pressed for more visas to study in the U.S.

Baha'i Concerns

17.(C) An Iranian Baha'i couple resident in UAE outlined to Barks-Ruggles March 17 the situation for Baha'is in Iran, as well as some of the problems they face in the UAE. The wife left Iran five years ago, after being denied a passport for 13 years. She continues to travel back and forth and to date has had no problems. Her husband has lived outside Iran for much longer.

18.(C) The couple believed that in the past few months, the nuclear issue has distracted the Iranian government, and pressure has eased somewhat on the Baha'i community. That said, the couple believed that should Iran get a nuclear weapon, the world could experience terrorism far worse than 9/11. Because the Baha'i religion is non-political, Baha'is do not fight back

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in any organized way against the repression they face.

19.(C) Asked about Hojjatiyeh (reftel B), the couple said they

believe Hojjatiyeh members in various branches of the security forces use their position to advance their own agenda and persecute Baha'is. This is likely done without explicit orders from the government, but the government takes no steps to rein them in. The couple had no other knowledge of the Hojjatiyeh agenda, other than being familiar with its anti-Baha'i stance.

20.(C) The couple said that about six years ago, Iranian authorities began recognizing Baha'i marriage attestations, but they said only some registries will issue certificates. Baha'is are issued an affidavit saying that they have attested they are married; the affidavit makes no mention of religion. The couple thought that a combination of thousands of letters that Baha'is sent to complain about their lack of marriage registration, plus former President Khatami's influence, led to the policy change. In addition, they said that Western condemnation of Iran for persecution of Baha'is has had an overall positive effect.

21.(C) Because Baha'is are not allowed to study in Iranian universities, they have developed their own underground university system. The Iranian government, however, does not recognize their degrees. The couple complained that no U.S. universities, other than one school in Indiana, recognize these degrees, unlike in Canada, where they are recognized. They thought it would be an interesting idea to try to partner with a distance-learning program.

22.(C) The couple described the situation of about 1000 Baha'i living in UAE, from Iran and numerous other countries, as relatively good, compared to the situation in other Arab countries, but said Baha'is do experience some problems with civil matters. For instance, they cannot formally register a Baha'i marriage. There are, however, a few sympathetic officials who will register them informally.

WMD-Free Gulf

23.(C) The Gulf Research Center briefed on its ongoing sessions with representatives from GCC countries, Iran, Iraq and Yemen for a declaration of principles supporting a WMD-Free Zone (WMDFFZ) in the Gulf, with the ultimate goal of a treaty. Dr. Mustafa Alani and Dr. Christian Koch said their next meeting will be in South Africa in May, sponsored by the South African MFA. They believe they have a commitment from Qatar, Bahrain, UAE, and Oman, but that the Saudis are still trying to gauge Iranian behavior. They also believe that the Iranian representatives at the previous meetings are close to the government and that Iran is close to a positive decision to support a WMD-free Gulf. They said they would remain skeptical of Iranian pledges, but thought it was best to control Iran regionally. In their view, Iran originally thought it could bypass the region and negotiate with the European Union, but that after the failure of the EU-3 talks, it was now turning to the region. The GRC saw a WMDFFZ pledge as a cornerstone for ultimately developing a regional security system. Alani and Koch called on the U.S. to affirm its support for Gulf WMDFFZ activities and praised Secretary Rice's joint statement with the GCC along these lines.

Comment

24.(C) The most actionable items that came out of these meetings were recommendations to increase VOA programming, up the involvement of political activists who have recently left Iran, and to develop children's programming. It was also an intriguing idea to put more thought into a long-term syllabus for VOA for what the US wants the programming to accomplish, and how to do this. The concerns about UAE-based activities are real, but are also a function of all the recent publicity given to our decision to expand operations here. While it is important to push the envelope of what we try to do here, it is also true that the less said about it, the better. End comment.

25.(U) This message has been cleared by DRL DAS Barks-Ruggles.
DAVIS